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## The Sisters and The Soldiers\*

*Virginia Walcott Beauchamp, Ph.D.*

As the hot summer of 1863 dragged to its end, large numbers of the wounded still lay in hospitals improvised in the town of Gettysburg, or on pallets of straw in tents near where they had fallen. Flies buzzed around them ceaselessly. Death stalked the survivors still; but they died now one by one—not in whole companies and battalions, as their comrades had fallen in early July. Among these sufferers strolled the curious—travelers touring the battlefield. Yet whatever romantic impulse had brought them to the scene of the famous battle, the mood soon faded away before the misery that now confronted them.

Not ten miles to the south, in the Maryland town of Emmitsburg, life went on more placidly. Residents there had also been touched by events surrounding the battle of Gettysburg. Some had the imagination to know in what ways they had all been changed. Others were still too young—and perhaps too sheltered—to realize that their world would never be quite the same.

One of these latter was a student at St. Joseph's Academy, among a handful of girls of the Confederate states who had been trapped at their school throughout the summer by the movement of armies. These Southern girls, who had come north almost a year before for what was conceded to be the best Catholic education then available, were now staying in the school dormitory, under supervision of the teaching staff of the Sisters of Charity. Something of the strain of their enforced association is revealed in a few lines of a letter from this girl to a luckier classmate, safe with her own family on their farm near Balti-

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\*This article, in a somewhat shorter form, previously appeared in the Summer 1986 issue of the *Maryland Historical Magazine*; it is used here with the permission of the editor.

more: "I am all in tremble afraid I will be caught. Last night we had a good *Lecture* about singing *political* songs we are forbidden to do it any longer we got the very *mischiev* for it every day we get a scholding...."<sup>1</sup> "Political songs" meant, of course, Confederate ballads; and the school's principal, Sister Raphael, had struggled all summer to contain the girls' patriotic fervor. Potentially their position was dangerous—surrounded by Union forces still dominating the region, and by townspeople and farmers who supported the Union cause.

A further glimpse into the principal's difficulties comes secondhand through another schoolgirl letter to the same correspondent, in whose family papers both letters have been preserved: "Mama had a letter from Sr. Raphael yesterday they were all well at St. Joseph's she mentioned that several of the girls had been detained for some time owing to the place being so strictly guarded they would not allow them to go from St. Joseph's to town without a pass...."<sup>2</sup>

Like most adolescent documents, these schoolgirl letters are primarily self-absorbed, revealing little of the extraordinary events of that summer that had thrown together in the same narrow circumstances various groups of Americans. Except for the vicissitudes of war, most of these people could never have occupied the same landscape. This is the story of what happened at St. Joseph's in the summer of 1863.

Virtually everyone who left a record of the events of that summer spoke of it with wonder. Some accounts were

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from Emma M. to May Preston, August 23, 1863, MS. 978, Manuscript Collection, Maryland Historical Society, 201 W. Monument St., Baltimore, MD 21201. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup>Letter from Mary to May Preston (dated from St. Louis), July 24, 1863. Ibid.

written at once, in the heat of excitement; others, from the perspective of many years. But all knew they had been parties to a historic moment that should live forever in the national memory. Each felt the responsibility to leave witness to how it was.

"It was a Saturday night," recalled Sister Marie Louise. The date was June 27. The Sisters of Charity, members of the first Catholic Order of native women religious in the United States, were all retiring. By this summer of 1863 their Order occupied a substantial establishment—a far cry from the drafty stone house in which their founder, Mother Elizabeth Seton, and her handful of family and supporters had weathered their first, miserable winter.

"The institution," wrote an Ohio officer who was to encamp there three days later, "...Farm and Buildings (especially the latter) is the finest I ever saw. I was astonished to find such magnificence in such a place, a place I never heard of before." In his penciled letter to a friend back home, the soldier described the "splendid" four-story brick buildings, the main chapel, the cemetery, and the farm.

But of the 60 or so Sisters still remaining at the institutional headquarters, the Ohio lieutenant saw only a few. These 60 were all of the 500 Sisters assigned there before the war who were not now caring elsewhere for the sick and wounded.

They wear black dresses (without any hoops) with white aprons, a cape coming over the shoulders and coming to a peak at the waist. And a white bonnet in the shape of a scoop shovel (only more so). It has a cape also which comes down to the shoulder. The bonnet is the ugliest piece of

furniture I ever saw, although it was as white as snow as was the apron.<sup>3</sup>

On the night of June 27 the Sisters had no premonition of the events which would change so drastically their daily lives. Sister Marie Louise, secretary of the Community, shared a sleeping apartment with Mother Ann Simeon. Their two rooms, in what was called the Gothic Building, opened into one another by double doors which were never closed. From southern and western windows of this corner apartment, the two women could look out on a clear, unobstructed view.

Mother Ann Simeon was already in bed. Sister Marie Louise, however, was still stirring about when she became aware of unaccustomed, indecipherable sounds which seemed to be moving in their direction. Then the neighing of horses was clearly heard. Looking out of the windows, she could distinguish through the darkness the flashing on and off of lights on a hill not far from the tollgate on the main road. Realizing at once that the army were upon them, the two women hastened to dress. Then they went hurriedly and silently out of the building, walking quickly to the separate structure that housed the Academy and where their school-girl charges were sleeping. At that time an exterior staircase led from the porch of the school building up along the room that housed the children's infirmary. At this second-floor level the Sisters entered, as quietly as they

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<sup>3</sup>Letter from Lt. William Ballentine, Co. E, 82nd Regiment, O.V.I., 11th Corps. Army of the Potomac. The letter was discovered in 1965 in the papers belonging to a descendant of the addressee. A neighbor, Lucy E. Howden, of Richmond, IL, typed a copy, which has been placed in the archives of the Daughters of Charity, St. Joseph's Provincial House, Emmitsburg, MD 21727, where it has been made available to me by the archivist, Sister Aloysia.

could. They were followed now, however, by other Sisters who had become aware of the strange sounds nearby. Quietly the small procession moved through the music room and then up an interior stairway to a cupola atop the building. During the school year this structure was used for the girls' lessons in astronomy. But it was also the best look-out over the surrounding countryside. "There they stood," wrote the Order's historian, "listening, and watching through the dark the lights of the vast army encamping in the fields...." These military units, of the Union army, had chosen to bed down in an area closest to what was called the hill-house, quarters of the two Vincentian priests who were chaplains assigned to St. Joseph's—Father Francis Burlando and his assistant, Father Hippolitus Gandolfo.

When the Sisters had first retired on that Saturday evening, the farm field opposite the priests' quarters was, as the Sisters put it, "in fine clover." Their farm manager, Joseph Brawner, would be planning to cut it soon for storage in the hay loft. The mowing machine, in fact, had already been placed in one of the meadows, ready for the task. But the mowing was never to take place. When the sun rose on that Sunday morning, the next day, nothing at all was left of the clover; the field, in the words of the chronicler, was "barren and bare as a board."<sup>4</sup>

Less evocative is the Sisters' copy of a memo dated also on Sunday. Its military curtness, however, tells the same story:

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<sup>4</sup>*Annals of St. Joseph's*, pp. 520-521. The *Annals* is a collection of holograph and typewritten manuscripts, arranged chronologically with pages numbered consecutively. Photocopies of relevant documents have been made available to me through the kindness of the Daughters of Charity.

This is to certify that Joseph Brawner is entitled to pay, for 16000 pounds of hay, being the amount consumed and destroyed by the 5th Mich. Cavalry while quartered on the grounds of St. Joseph's House (Sisters of Charity) on the night of 27th of June 1863.

William O. North  
1st Lt. Ed. A.B.W.  
5th Mich. Cavalry

Joseph Brawner has left no record of his own emotions as he looked out on that sterile ending of his springtime labor; but he told the Sisters that he had granted the soldiers' request to graze their horses, "knowing the folly of refusing."<sup>5</sup>

About the middle of that Sunday afternoon large numbers of troops began to arrive. Sister Mary Jane Stokes and Sister Camilla O'Keeffe, treasurer for St. Joseph's, were walking together toward the barn—perhaps to appraise the damages—when they became aware of noise behind them. Turning to look back toward the house, they saw a large gathering of soldiers collecting by the door. "The poor fellows looked half-starved,—lank as herrings, and barefoot." That was how Sister Mary Jane remembered them, in an account she left with St. Joseph's in 1886. And most of all, she remembered the Sisters' miracle. All of them kept busy feeding the hungry soldiers. Some Sisters were making coffee, others were cutting bread, which they handed out as fast as the men reached out to receive it. All evening the Sisters were busy in this way, as one squad of soldiers succeeded another. "I was afraid," said Sister Mary Jane, "there would be no bread for the Sisters' supper. However, they had supper, and plenty."

But Sister Mary Jane, whose regular assignment was in the kitchen, was worried about breakfast for her

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<sup>5</sup>*Annals*, p. 521.

colleagues. After this unexpected strain on their resources, what could they possibly find to eat? Distressed, she scurried out to the bake house behind the kitchen. And what she saw there astounded her. For on the table that stood to receive the hot loaves as they regularly came from the ovens was, as she put it, "the baking of the day." The words are underlined in the manuscript account, as if to catch the emphasis in Sister Mary Jane's voice as she told her story. "*I did not see it multiplied,*" she said, "*but I saw it there.*"<sup>6</sup>

While the Sisters were trying in their own way to minister to the hunger of the men, Father Burlando and Father Gandolfo were greeting the generals, who confessed to their own need for food. The only nourishment the officers had eaten that day, they said, had come from their knapsacks. The generals assured the Fathers of security for the grounds. Guards would be posted, they said, and martial law would apply while the army units were in the area.

The Fathers, for their part, offered the hospitality of what is called the White House, the historic second dwelling once occupied by the sainted Mother Seton. In the 1860s it was used as an infirmary for the Sisters and as a residence for their physician, Dr. Patterson, and his wife. Both the Pattersons greeted the generals with kindness; and Mrs. Patterson served their meals, with food prepared by the kitchen Sisters.<sup>7</sup>

The generals were true to their word, and one, a Frenchman, took personal charge of establishing sentries around the place. "Here and there they were dotted," wrote Sister Marie Louise, "standing on guard two hours, fagged out with fatigue, and hungry as wolves." When one of the

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 529.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 532.



Sisters offered food to a sentry, the respectful man replied, "Glad to get it, Ma'am, but couldn't take it unless Captain of the Guard gives permission." This was sought by the Sister, and granted, and the poor starving sentry hastily swallowed the provisions she was able to offer.

On that same Sunday evening, the Ohio Volunteer Infantry, of which Lt. William Ballentine, our letter writer, was a member, were marching toward Frederick. They had pulled up stakes around 6:00 p.m., after a sojourn of several days at Middletown, closer to the Potomac. Their officers, anxious to avoid the city which was the county seat, marched their men fast—"part of the time Double Quicking," Ballentine wrote—in a route that circled Frederick. "So I did not get to see the city at all. It is said to be very large and nice." For a few hours his company bedded down beyond Frederick. Then rising before 4:00 of the next morning, June 29, they traversed the twenty-five miles to Emmitsburg, which they reached by 6:00 that evening. Not until the next morning, Tuesday the 30th, did they settle in a shady grove near the farm buildings that belonged to the Sisters of Charity. Seated there, gazing in wonderment at the fine structures of St. Joseph's, Ballentine penciled his letter to the friend back home.

A young man and Protestant, Ballentine had noted the faces under the crisp headdresses of the Sisters—"most all young and good looking, while some of them are beautiful. And it seemed to me a shame to keep them immured in a gloomy building like that with no appropriate society." A farmer himself, he descanted on the value of the handsome stone barn: "It never cost less than \$3,000." In admiring detail his pen lingered on the draft animals of the establishment—six fine horses and six huge mules. "The team of mules are splendid. They are six of the largest mules I ever saw, and I see a great many in the army."

Meanwhile, on June 29 in Emmitsburg, D. Agnew, Justice of the Peace, had affixed his signature to a document attesting to the truth of the claim for damages sustained by the Sisters of Charity in the occupation of their property. Nothing was said about the bread and cold meats used to feed the soldiers. But listed on the official paper addressed to Sister Camilla O'Keeffe representing the Order are the following items of loss: 109 cords of fuel, valued at \$2.50 per cord—\$272.50; 13½ tons of hay at \$9.00 per ton—\$121.50; and 120 bushels of rye at \$1.00 per bushel—\$120.00. Perhaps the rye had been lost in the baking of so many extra loaves of bread. If so, neither the Sisters, nor the Lord, made claim for the labor in baking and serving it. Charity had always been the Sisters' mission. Of themselves they gave unstintingly. Their pay was in a different currency: "Oh, with what expressions of thanks did they not receive the meal from the hands of the Sisters."<sup>8</sup>

While most of the Sisters were feeding the hungry soldiers, the two priests, augmented by another from the town parish, supplied the needs of the spirit. All three heard confessions throughout the day from the Catholics among the men. To each was given a scapular to hang from his shoulders, and to some medals, until the supply was gone. The scapulars, small cloth badges with holy pictures, worn front and back, were hung from the shoulders by colored connecting cords. To this day their manufacture and distribution is a major commitment of the Daughters of Charity. In 1863 this talisman of the spirit must have helped to still the panic rising in the breasts of many men.

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<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 532-533.

Sister Camilla recalled:

The fathers remained as long as there was a soldier to be heard and invested with a pair of scapulars. Never did we witness such satisfaction as to see those poor men express their hope and confidence in the Mother of God that she would save their souls any way, even if they should fall in the terrible battle that they were facing.

The men feared what lay before them. But their artillery had moved north ahead of cavalry and foot soldiers. Perhaps the men took comfort in this heavy fire-power to support their own positions, but to Sister Camilla, "a sight of cannons was terrible."<sup>9</sup>

If to the hundreds of barefoot American farm boys, the picturesque habit worn then by the Sisters seemed strange indeed, one among the ranks of the generals must have looked on those garments as a touch of home. This was General Philippe Regis de Trobriand, a French aristocrat. As an officer volunteer in the Army of the Potomac, he commanded the Third Brigade of the First Division of Third Corps. Unlike the orders for Lt. Ballentine's unit, General de Trobriand on the way northward had led his men directly through Frederick. Here their welcome, as he later recalled, was "almost triumphal." The contrast was refreshing against the earlier hostility of people in Baltimore. In Frederick, "All the houses were draped; all the women were at the windows, waving their handkerchiefs; all the men were at their doors, waving their hats."<sup>10</sup> But Emmitsburg was different. Ballentine described it as "one of the worst

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 533.

<sup>10</sup>Regis de Trobriand, *Four Years with the Army of the Potomac*, trans. George W. Dauchy (Boston: Ticknor and Company, 1889), p. 479.

secesh holes in Maryland." De Trobriand seems not to have commented.

The General, however, has left an urbane and charming anecdote concerning his encounter with the Sisters. To him, their habit, which was modeled on a French Provincial costume, would have seemed familiar. Where an Ohio youth saw with wonder the fine stone buildings of St. Joseph's campus, the former Parisian looked with wry amusement on the excitement of the good Sisters, who had been so unaccountably caught up in this masculine enterprise of war. Many years later the general was to write for his fellow Frenchmen a full and rich account of his experiences in this cataclysm that split a nation. But within this work of military analysis, descriptions of campsites and terrain, and profiles of significant men, de Trobriand's recounting of his days at St. Joseph's stands out like a little gem:

There is a large convent at Emmitsburg, with which is connected a school for young ladies, which has a reputation extending throughout the United States. It was on the domain of St. Joseph that I had placed my brigade. A small stream made part of the boundary line. I leave it to you to guess if the good sisters were not excited, on seeing the guns moving along under their windows and the regiments, bristling with bayonets, spreading out through their orchards. Nothing like it had ever troubled the calm of this holy retreat. When I arrived at a gallop in front of the principal door, the doorkeeper, who had ventured a few steps outside, completely lost her head. In her fright, she came near being trampled under foot by the horses of my staff, which she must have taken for the horses of the Apocalypse,—if, indeed, there are any horses in the Apocalypse, of which I am not sure. The superior, on the contrary, with whom I asked to speak in the parlor, came down calm and dignified. I had no need to reassure her. Her conversation betrayed neither fear nor even inquietude. She perfectly comprehended the necessities of war. When I asked her to send me up to the belfry, from which the

whole surrounding country was visible, she sent for the chaplain, and ordered him to act as my guide.

The chaplain was an Italian priest, or, at least, of Italian origin, who did not sacrifice to the graces, and whose sermons would never have set the Hudson on fire. He led us through the dormitories and the class-room of the boarding-school, at that moment deserted, the superior having very wisely sent all the scholars to their relatives. There remained but five or six, belonging to Southern families, who had not heard from their friends in a long time.

We reached the belfry by a narrow and winding staircase. I went first. At the noise of my boots sounding on the steps, a rustling of dresses and murmuring of voices were heard above my head. There were eight or ten young nuns, who had mounted up there to enjoy the extraordinary spectacle of guns in battery, of stacked muskets, of sentinels walking back and forth with their arms in hand, of soldiers making coffee in the gardens, of horses ready saddled eating their oats under the apple trees;—all things of which they had not the least idea. We had cut off their retreat, and they were crowded against the windows, like frightened birds, asking Heaven to send them wings with which to fly away.

"Ah! sisters," I said to them, "I catch you in the very act of curiosity. After all, it is a very venial sin, and I am sure that the very reverend father here present will freely give you absolution therefor."

The poor girls, much embarrassed, looked at each other, not knowing what to reply. The least timid ventured a smile. In their hearts, they were thinking of but one thing: to escape as soon as the officers accompanying me left the way clear.

"Permit me," I said, "to make one request of you. Ask St. Joseph to keep the rebels away from here; for, if they come before I get away, I do not know what will become of your beautiful convent."

They immediately disappeared, crowding each other along the staircase. I have never returned to Emmitsburg; but it would astonish me very little to hear that the two armies had gone to Gettysburg to fight, on account of the

miracle performed by St. Joseph, interceding in favor of these pious damsels.<sup>11</sup>

Although the General recalled Father Burlando with patronizing humor, the good Sisters saw their chaplain in quite another light. He took very seriously his many responsibilities. Though he did not complain, his own quarters had been turned over to General O.O. Howard. And although de Trobriand had posted sentries around the campus to ensure the Sisters' safety, neither Father Burlando nor Mother Ann Simeon rested secure in those arrangements. The Mother Superior had, in fact, appointed two Sisters each night to patrol the residence for the Order. At the usual hour for retiring, however, all lights were extinguished; and the Sister sentries were directed to walk a beat in complete darkness from kitchen pantry to the Church door. Only a dark lantern, its one glass side placed inward in a window of the Community room, cast a tiny glow of illumination. The windows themselves were closed with board shutters on the inside, so that no light from outside the building could penetrate into the dark interior.

On "one of those nights of deep anxiety," as the chronicler puts it, Sister Marie Louise was walking the rounds with Sister Loretta Mullery—"the former full of nerve and decision, the latter timorous to the last degree." On their journey, at about 11 p.m., they were able to discern the posted sentry near the corner of the building the Sisters occupied. Then suddenly, "in the deep, deep darkness," they heard beside them "a frightful and unearthly yell." Then all was again silent. Leaping forward in her terror, Sister Loretta clung to her stronger companion. And for a short

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<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 485-487.

time both stood dead still in their tracks. Then, taking charge, Sister Marie Louise insisted that the two return for the dark lantern, then retrace their steps to this spot to try to discover the cause of this sudden, paralyzing noise. When they returned, however, "not a living creature could be found....; the mystery was never solved."<sup>12</sup>

During the several nights of this military occupation, Father Burlando stayed at St. Joseph's. A couch had been made up for him in a small chamber off the room he normally occupied in conducting his religious duties. But the anxious Father slept very little. The least sound would rouse him at once, and he would appear, fully dressed, in the corridor of the building.

One night when Sister Marie Louise was patrolling with another Sister, suddenly the latter started. In the gloom she had seen nearby the dark outlines of a human figure. Then a second glance revealed the unmistakable shape of a familiar hat. It was Father Burlando, restless and uneasy, prowling the corridor outside his room. Although the Sisters urged him to take his rest against the many anxieties of the day ahead, the good Father resisted. Acceding to his obvious desire for human contact, Sister Marie Louise then invited him to join them in the Community room of the building. Here, not far from the door leading out to the porch, the three figures—guardians over the Sisterhood—sat quietly talking, cheering one another with voices kept muted so that the sentry outside the wall would not be able to overhear.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>*Annals*, pp. 522-523, 526-527.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 527-528.

Throughout these stirring days, Mother Ann Simeon took great care to keep the young Seminary Sisters—novices of the Order—separated from the surrounding soldiers. The doors to the seminary building were kept locked therefore on the inside, by day as well as by night. And as a result, it happened on one occasion that when two of the young Sisters had to leave their building on an errand for their establishment, they found themselves on their return—doubtless to their own alarm—locked on the outside with all the soldiers.

Besides being locked, the porch door to this building was closed off from the outside view by a venetian blind that covered the glass pane. Unfortunately, on another occasion, this blind was inadvertantly opened and a soldier looked in. This time the soldier was to take alarm. For “At the unaccustomed sight of all those little staid, demure, white capped creatures,” says the historian of the *Annals*, “he seemed dismayed and left precipitously.”<sup>14</sup>

Not all the Sisters were equally demure. One, finding herself alone in the washroom, had the temerity to peer out a window as a regiment marched past. Diverted by the procession, and distracted perhaps by the noise they made as they walked in step, the “Little Cap” failed to note the entrance of another person into the room. This was Sister McDonnough, the Seminary Directress. “My Sister!” the latter spoke out sternly. “What are you looking at?”

“Soldiers, Sister!” came the unabashed and frank reply.<sup>15</sup>

The Sisters’ records of those stress-filled days recount one occasion when Father Burlando especially showed his

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<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 528.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*



courage. The Sisters had all this time been providing food for the hungry men who were encamped everywhere that space could be found for them. All day long each day, the Sisters sliced meat, buttered bread, and filled canteens with coffee and milk. Luckily General de Trobriand had augmented their own supplies with a whole beef to be shared among this "ceaseless tide of famished soldiers."<sup>16</sup> Yet one of the colonels—an unnamed, but officious fellow—evidently took for granted the Sisters' charitable gift of service. Presumptuously he requisitioned an enormous amount of bread to be readied by the Sisters against the following day. They were appalled at the size of the order. To fill it would have taxed all the energy of the small household and all the resources of the establishment, even if they were to stay up all night, doing nothing else but baking bread. And still they would not have been able to meet either the deadline or the amount requisitioned. The Sisters could only stand by in consternation. This was when Father Burlando went into action. Because the whole establishment—indeed all of Emmitsburg—was subject to military law, Father Burlando applied at once to the officer in charge for a pass to town; and though his request was at first refused, the good Father persisted. He stressed his own need to reach his quarters, which were in the town. He did not state, however, that he wanted to confer with General Meade, who then occupied the priests' residence. Shortly later Father Burlando arrived at his own door, where he asked to speak with his distinguished houseguest. The latter, he was informed, was asleep, however, and not to be disturbed. But when an aide to the general understood the matter of the requisition, he took his own action, sending Father Burlando

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<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 522.

to the appropriate officer, a General Scofield, in charge of commissary. And Scofield, in turn, became indignant at the assumption of authority by the minor officer who had issued the requisition. Stores enough had been provided for the men, Scofield assured Father Burlando. The Sisters had no obligation, he said, to provide food for the men encamped around their premises. Thus Father Burlando was able to carry back to the Sisters a message that released them from their unjust burden.<sup>17</sup>

Yet one memorandum remaining in the possession of the Daughters of Charity disputes Scofield's assessment of the food supply. On July 1 the Provost Marshal, Major H.B. Vanboorlus, of the headquarters unit under General Kilpatrick, acknowledged receipt from the House of St. Joseph's of thirty-six loaves of bread, one bushel of cakes, and one hundred pounds of bacon—"articles...actually needed," the memo reads, "for the troops under my command."

Another event occurred on July 1 that was to be remembered through the years by a drummer boy with the Mozart Regiment, the 40th of New York, which was part of the Brigade commanded by de Trobiand. Fifty years later, established in Chicago as a dentist, this former drummer boy wrote back to St. Joseph's. He was hoping to commemorate a "parade thru your convent yard for the patriotic edification of the Sisters who were at the windows waving handkerchiefs and flags." And well he might remember. For at the head of the procession of what he estimated as about 400 men was "a fine Bugle and Drum Corp." How smartly they must have stepped out behind the parade marshal—"that brave and chevalarous and catholic

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<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 523-524.

gentleman,—Col. Thomas Egan.” (Egan “afterwards distinguished himself at Gettysburg,” the aging dentist recalled.) “I wonder if there is one soul living in your walls who remembers the incident?” Included with his letter requesting permission to hold a fiftieth-anniversary restaging of that parade march was a picture of himself as he looked in 1863—Charles T. Barnes, a serious youngster, perhaps 13, staring straight into the camera, hands poised above his drums and a row of buttons marching down the center of his spiffy jacket. As things turned out, the rest of the regiment—they must have been nearing 70 in 1913 when he wrote—found it “impracticable” to restage that march. So Dr. Barnes came on alone.<sup>18</sup>

But to return to the events of 1863.

Possibly feeling that the excitement of that afternoon—with its march by of 400 soldiers to the crisp beat of drums and the call of the bugles—interfered too conspicuously with the quiet discipline the Seminary Sisters should have been taking to heart, the Sister in charge of their training warned the novices that every one of them might expect to be sent home. “Patriotic edification,” shown by flags and handkerchiefs waved out of schoolroom windows, was scarcely the purpose which had brought these young women to this dedicated and holy place. Or perhaps the Directress was more concerned for the Sisters’ safety. They were working that Wednesday, carrying dry goods and bed clothes from the children’s dormitories in the Academy to the basement of the church. Everyone seems to have anticipated the destruction of the house under a general bombardment.

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<sup>18</sup>Letter from Charles T. Barnes, March 15, 1913, from Chicago, IL, and second letter, dated June 18, 1913. Archives, St. Joseph’s

But to the novices, a forced departure to their own homes must have seemed the greater threat. As Sister Felicite remembered the occasion, after the Directress' warning to her charges, "such a boo-hooing you never heard!"<sup>19</sup> But the expected calamity did not occur—at least in Emmitsburg. For between 2:00 and 3:00 the next morning—while the troops slept in darkness—an order came from army headquarters to march for Gettysburg. "In fifteen minutes it was done," the *Annals* records, "and St. Joseph's Valley relapsed into quiet."<sup>20</sup> Sister Camilla recalled the sound of the "quick step" as the men headed toward the Gettysburg road. "Not a vestige of the great Army was to be seen...," she said. "Glad we were to get rid of them."<sup>21</sup>

If we can believe a letter written by Father Burlando to his Superior General in France about these extraordinary days, St. Joseph's and the village of Emmitsburg had been, in fact, the very center of an immense portion of the Northern army, troops numbering "80,000 strong." He went on to record how the units had moved into the area over several days, "regiment after regiment, division after division." They had advanced, he wrote, "with artillery and cavalry," and they had taken "possession of all the heights, encamped in order of battle." In that same order they had departed.

But the vacuum these forces left in their withdrawal was soon to be filled by a different army, "not less numerous," Father Burlando wrote, and "ranged," he said, "in line of battle as the first."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>*Annals*, pp. 529-530.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 524.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 534.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 561.

The Sisters' own record seems to dispute his view both of the size and distribution of the Southern forces. But of course they had less opportunity to see for themselves. In any case, so sudden had been the departure of the Northerners, and the feat accomplished in such utter darkness, that Father Gandolfo remained wholly unaware of the change in circumstances. One must suppose that he slept soundly indeed. Thus it happened that when he arrived at St. Joseph's before dawn to say Mass as usual, he was stopped by pickets, whom he failed to recognize as Confederates.

"But I am going to say Mass at St. Joseph's," exclaimed the good Father. "We have General Meade at our house."

The *Annals* narrator comments drily: "This profession of loyalty was not likely to advance his cause much." And then in language that reveals a great deal about her own sympathies, she continues: "However, a few more words brought matters straight, and the gallant soldiers discovered probably they might have met worse friends than good Father Gandolfo."

Following the pickets, several large units of "the Southern grey swept round St. Joseph's"—so the *Annals* account continues—"not in large force, but detachments of cavalry, picket men etc." Some Confederate officers, including a Colonel of Artillery, Latrobiere, found lodgings in the orphanage on St. Joseph's campus.<sup>23</sup>

Father Burlando met some on his way from Emmitsburg one day, and was surprised by the salutation, "Good morning, Father Burlando! How is Jennie Butts?" "Jenny

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* Besides educating the daughters of the well-to-do at the Academy, the Sisters of Charity trained impoverished orphan girls in household skills suitable for their future employment.

Butts" was his sister, a child from the South in the Academy.<sup>24</sup>

During the whole period of the Northern occupation of the area, Sister Raphael, principal of the Academy, had had great trouble in suppressing the overt hostility of her few Southern charges. But her authority was taxed still further when the girls' compatriots arrived on the scene. In fact, it fell apart altogether on one occasion:

One evening they set all rules and discipline at defiance when a few cavalry men approached, and [the girls] called out from the avenue: "Give me a button. I'm from South Carolina!" Another: "And I'm from Louisiana!"<sup>25</sup>

Throughout the war romantic girls had begged military buttons from soldiers' uniforms. The buttons were prized as souvenirs. The two girls who spoke out on this occasion would have been Anna Northrop and Mary Bruce Thompson. Bruce, for so she was called, returned eventually to the family plantation near New Orleans, where she waited out the war. But Anna Northrop, an orphan, continued on at St. Joseph's, from which she graduated in 1867.

Although the Sisters kept their own partiality for the Southern cause under closer guard, the *Annals* volume makes clear the true affiliation of at least some of their number. One of these was Mother Euphemia, then the Assistant to Mother Ann Simeon, whom she would succeed after the latter's death a few months later. One day Mother Euphemia was called to the parlor to greet a group of callers

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<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 524-525.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 525.

— several cavalymen of uncertain military designation. The historian of the *Annals* comments by indirection on the impoverished situation of the Southern troops: “As the Northern Army did so much in those days towards provisioning and clothing the Southern Army, one could not judge much by exterior apparel who they had to deal with.” The Sisters, she wrote, “were very cautious....Mother was at a loss and her manner constrained.”

Suddenly one of the soldiers, appraising the situation, spoke up. “Sister, I do believe you take us for Yankees!”

His comment broke the ice. Put at ease now by the certainty of whom she was entertaining, Mother Euphemia invited her callers to rest themselves and to join her in a small repast. Bread, still warm, was fresh from the oven and the soldiers “lunched gloriously.” The historian seems to have shared the meal.<sup>26</sup>

Sometime during the quiet that followed the departure of the military units heading north, Father Gandolfo went alone into the graveyard of the Catholic church in town. Here, in a small culvert, he had sequestered a sum of money — specie in a box — which belonged to himself and which he had placed there for safekeeping. But the hiding place was less safe than he had supposed. Or perhaps his actions had been observed when he prepared the little cache. At any rate, when he went to retrieve his property, the box was missing and the money gone. Dismayed, he must have reported the loss to Mother Ann Simeon; she, says the *Annals*, “pitying the good Father supplied the deficit.”<sup>27</sup>

What happened during the next few days on the fields and amidst the outcroppings of rock around Gettysburg is not

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<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 525-526.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 525.

part of this story of the Sisters—though indeed they heard with awe and regret the terrible booming of the guns and cannon:

About noon on the 1st of July we heard very distinctly the cannonading—Bum, Bum—so terrific. This kept on until the afternoon of the 4th when the Confederates were defeated and retreated away.

That is how Sister Camilla, years afterwards, recalled the events of those dreadful days.<sup>28</sup> Father Burlando, in his letter to the Superior General in France immediately following the bombardment, was also appalled:

The bellowing of those instruments of death and destruction was frightful, and the thick smoke which rose in the atmosphere was black as the clouds which precede a tempest....Whilst the booming of the cannon announced that God was punishing the iniquities of man, our Sisters were in the church praying, and imploring mercy for all mankind.<sup>29</sup>

Too distant to see the smoke, but close enough to hear the bombardment, the mother of the schoolgirl correspondent of those students at St. Joseph's made her own record of the sounds of the bloody events occurring across the state line in Pennsylvania. Sitting at her desk in her home near Towsontown, some 55 miles away, she wrote from a different mood, for she dreamed of a Southern victory. On her diary page for Friday, July 3, she penned these words:

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<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 534.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 561.



We have been greatly excited this afternoon and evening by the most continued cannonading in the direction of Gettysburg. The battle wherever it is must be a fearful one.<sup>30</sup>

Her impression has relevance here, for the lives of her family bisected the lives of the quiet Sisters before the dreadful aftermath of Gettysburg was done.

On Sunday, at St. Joseph's, Father Burlando and fourteen of the Sisters set forth toward the battlefield in the institution's omnibus and a carriage. Their intent was to assess the damage and to care for the wounded. Word of the holocaust, which had ended the previous evening, came down to them in the words of a few "straggling Confederates," who took refuge briefly with the Sisters. "How they cleared themselves was a wonder," said Sister Camilla, "for if the poor fellows were caught they would be prisoners." Revived and strengthened by the good breakfast provided them, the exhausted men went on their way.<sup>31</sup>

Packed in the carriage with the small caravan from St. Joseph's were baskets of supplies for the wounded—bandages, medicine, and other provisions. When Father Burlando and the Sisters had reached six miles away from their starting point, the little group were stopped by a barricade. Some 300 yards further was another—this one "to intercept all communication," as Father Burlando described it. From their vantage point at this second barricade, a company of Union soldiers had been able for a long time to observe the two vehicles moving steadily for-

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<sup>30</sup>1863 Diary of Madge Preston, MS. 1861, Maryland Historical Society.

<sup>31</sup>*Annals*, p. 534.

ward from St. Joseph's. As the group of Sisters neared the barricade, several pickets in a field off to one side suddenly separated from the rest of the group and ran forward to the fence with uplifted muskets. Father Burlando at once tied a white handkerchief to the end of his cane, which he held high aloft; and then he dismounted from the carriage to explain the purpose of their journey. By this time the men had lowered their muskets; and the barricade—a row of tree trunks stretched across the road—was swung open so that the little party might proceed toward Gettysburg. "As we passed," recalled Sister Matilda Coskery, "the pickets lifted their caps and bowed showing their pleasure on seeing the Sisters going up to attend the sufferers."<sup>32</sup>

Then suddenly the battlefield came into view. "What a frightful spectacle!" wrote Father Burlando to his correspondent in distant France.

Some ruins of burned houses,—the dead of both armies lying here and there,—numbers of dead horses, thousands of guns, sword vehicles, wheels, projectiles of all dimensions, coverings, hats, habiliments of all color covered the fields, and the roads. We were obliged to make circuits in order to keep from passing over dead bodies. Our horses terrified recoiled, or sprang from one side to the other. The further we advanced, the more abundant were the evidences presented to our eyes of a terrible conflict, and tears could not be restrained in presence of these objects of horror.<sup>33</sup>

Sister Matilda's account is more emotional—more focused on the human cost in this great catastrophe.

But on reaching the Battle grounds, awful! to see the men lying dead on the road some by the side of their horses.

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<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 535, 561.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 562.

—O, it was beyond description—hundreds of both armies lying dead almost on the track that the driver had to be careful not to pass over the bodies—O! this picture of human beings slaughtered down by their fellow men in a cruel civil war was perfectly awful. The battlefield a very extensive space on either side of the road—the east was Meads [sic] stand the west Lonstreet's [sic] on both sides were men digging [sic] pits and putting the bodies down by the dozens. One newly made grave contained fifty bodies of Confederates—...in another spot might be pointed out where the body of such a Genl lay until removed to another location—in this frightful condition we found the Battlegrounds of that fearful Battle of Gettysburg.<sup>34</sup>

In the town of Gettysburg, all was confusion and excitement. Among the many Union officers crowding now into its narrow streets were several whom the Sisters recognized from the week before. These welcomed the Sisters gratefully. Some of the men were lamenting loudly the unfortunate escape of the Confederate General Longstreet, and his army. Regular inhabitants of the town were now at last emerging from their cellars, adding to the crush of people. "Terror," wrote Father Burlando, was "still painted on their countenances."<sup>35</sup> Moving slowly through the crowd, which parted before their horses, the Sisters' vehicles finally reached McClellan's Hotel, which faced into the square in the center of the village. Here the hotel parlors were immediately turned over to the Sisters, as their own center of operations.

But the Sisters wanted to get right to work. The needs of the wounded were what they had come here to tend to. But

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<sup>34</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 536.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 562.

first, accompanied by several of the officers, Father Burlando and the Sisters went from one building to another, where the more fortunate among the wounded had been brought for shelter. Every house, every church, the court house, the Protestant seminary building—all had been filled, “and still there were many thousands extended upon the field of battle nearly without succor; impossible,” wrote Father Burlando, “to attend to all!”<sup>36</sup>

Sister Matilda was deeply affected by what she saw in the Catholic church. In the sanctuary itself were the most distressing cases—those “of very worst amputated limbs.” The Blessed Sacrament, she observed with some relief, had been moved to safety at the residence of the priests. “Now was the moment to go to work,” she remembered, “and the Sisters did truly work in bandaging the poor wounded, some fixing drinks.”<sup>37</sup>

Leaving two Sisters in each one of the three largest improvised hospitals, Father Burlando remained to hear a few confessions. Then, with two of the Sisters riding back with him, he returned to St. Joseph’s. Twelve Sisters remained in Gettysburg with their work of mercy. At the hotel parlors, their “Milletary Quarters,” the Sisters took a few moments to revive themselves with food and drink, then went out again to tend to their “patients of the Battle,” as Sister Matilda called them.

Impossible to describe the condition of those poor wounded men, the weather was warm and very damp for some days after the battle, generally the case when there is so much *Powder* used—they were *covered* with *vermin*

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<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 537.

actually that we could hardly bear this part of the *filth*. We didn't see a woman in the whole place that evening, they either escaped away in the country or hid in the cellars, the following day they appeared in their homes, frightened and looking like ghosts—so very terrified the poor women were during the fearful battle. No wonder!<sup>38</sup>

That first night the Sisters slept fitfully on the floor of the hotel parlor. The next day they were grateful when Father Burlando arrived with reinforcements, and also with beds and blankets so they all might sleep more comfortably. Mother Ann Simeon had sent also with the new party some cooked hams, coffee, tea, and whatever else she thought would be of use. How gratefully were all these things received by the poor, exhausted Sisters. Through the new arrivals word reached the group in Gettysburg, to their great relief, that Sister Euphemia had headed another contingent of Sisters, gone south to augment their colleagues in the military hospitals set up by the Confederates. And on the next day their own ranks in Gettysburg were increased by new arrivals from Baltimore. So great, however, was the need throughout the land that enough Sisters could never be released to truly lighten the burden of the small group in Gettysburg. Sisters of Charity were attending to nursing duties in many places—at the West Philadelphia Hospital, in Washington, at Point Lookout. Even the Procuratrix for the Order, Sister Baptista, had left her institutional duties to act as a nurse at Point Lookout.<sup>39</sup>

Sister Matilda described with great particularity the details of their nursing situation:

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<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 539.

For three miles outside of the town was converted into an hospital by tents and the farm houses. Ambulances were provided for the Sisters to take clothing etc. out to the wounded many, hundreds, of whom lay on the ground on their blankets since straw would be given from the barns which the poor boys were glad to get rather than lie on the ground. We noticed as we were going through the woods a red flag out with a board marked "1700 wounded down this way."

Following the sign, the ambulance driver turned down into a woods where, "in a heart-rending state," lay the wounded. The Sisters were carrying with them clothing and jellies, with which they made drinks to nourish the men. But among the objects which were perhaps most gratefully received were combs. These were needed, said Sister Matilda, "the worst way."

O, yes for some were in a frightful condition. The Sisters too brought plenty of the vermin along on their clothes!—I shudder on thinking of this part of the Sisters sufferings....The weather was very warm. We noticed one large man whose leg had to be taken off another part of his body was in such a condition that the big maggots were crawling on the ground on which they crept from the body. Many others almost as bad but the whole of them were crawling with *lice* so that the Sisters did a great deal for those poor fellows by getting *combs* to get their heads clear of the troublesome *animals*.<sup>40</sup>




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<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 539-540.

Back at the priests' residence in Emmitsburg, three days after his first trip to the battlefield, Father Burlando was afflicted deeply by the visions of hell-on-earth that he had been witnessing. The sights he had seen surely confirmed God's wrath striking this unfortunate nation. As he finished the letter to his Superior in France, Father Burlando could hear now from the southwest some further cannonading.

My God when will you give peace to our unhappy country! We well merit these frightful chastisements, and they will not cease until we shall have been well humiliated. Aid us with your prayers, because the American does not pray;—and yet, without prayer how shall we appease the anger of God?

Under his signature he wrote the formula closing: "unworthy priest of the Mission." Perhaps the words of this formula, which had a formalized usage within the Congregation of the Mission, held for him this day a special poignancy, for his burden of responsibility and emotion must have seemed overwhelming.<sup>41</sup>

But in a few days Father Burlando would be able to reclaim for God some of these very men whose failure to pray he had been deploring to his Superior. Among the many wounded whose needs were ministered to by the Sisters was a contingent of Southern prisoners—mostly natives of Georgia and Alabama. These were kept at one of the field hospitals, a collection of tents and nearby farmhouses, where the Sisters found them "in great neglect." With the Sisters was a physician—his name in the handwritten account is illegible—who had earlier tended to the Confederate wounded at Point Lookout. There, under the

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 562-563.

influence of one of the Sisters of Charity and Father Pecherina, a Jesuit priest, the doctor had become converted to the Catholic faith. To the physician's great pleasure, this same Sister—apparently unknown to Sister Matilda, who is unable to give her name—was now with the group in Gettysburg. In fact, this Sister was standing beside Father Burlando at the very moment of her reunion with her important convert.

To the miserable wretches that lay before them on the ground, these witnesses to the glory of God now turned their attention. First, the good doctor bandaged the broken limbs and offered the medical assistance his skill could tender. To his ministrations the kind Sisters added their own special nurturance. Then his medical labors complete, the doctor set to work with saw, axe, and nails. With scraps of lumber lying about, he manufactured on the spot a kind of bedframe, "so that the poor fellows," said Sister Matilda, "thought they had beds now."

But the spiritual deprivation of these Southern soldiers seemed even worse than their deplorable physical plight. "They knew no more of religion than a Turk," said Sister Matilda—

no baptism—nor did some of them believe in Heaven  
nor hel [sic] only to live just as long as they could and  
enjoy life as it came—but God in His mercy raised up the  
Dr. who came in their way and became converted himself.

Talking ardently with the men, the good doctor described his own spiritual awakening and before long had kindled interest in those he was tending. Soon some of them were acknowledging: "The Sisters were Catholics, surely they must be right anyway."

Under the ministration of Father Pecherina and several other priests, about 60 of these formerly wayward men were



turned to God. These were not merely a band of ignorant rednecks — the record of Sister Matilda makes that clear:

The greater number...were highly educated, some of them officers in the Confederate Army — but no knowledge of God. When told some articles of our Faith why they would make an exclamation of surprise saying “We never heard that, Ma’am” — As for the necessity of Baptism they never dreamed of such a thing.

Not a single one of the men from Georgia or Alabama had previously received the rite of baptism. “No hereafter did those ignorant creatures of God believe in.”

But following their conversion, those who were dying had the solace, Sister Matilda testified, “of all the sacred truths;” those who survived went off to face their future incarceration with greater strength.

“We are going to prison now,” they said; “but it would be no prison,” they told the Sisters, “if we had you along to administer to our wants of soul and body.” Leaving the kind ministrations of the Sisters and setting forth under heavy Union guard, these Southern men were seen weeping as they moved away.<sup>42</sup>



When the Sisters of Charity had first agreed, in 1861, to take over responsibility for nursing services to those wounded in battle, the head of the Order had exacted certain concessions from the government of the United States. Among these were that a Catholic chaplain should attend the Sisters; that traveling expenses, lodging, food, and — if

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<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 540-544.

the duties were protracted—clothing needs should be supplied; and that the Sisters should be given complete freedom in their direction of both hospitals and ambulances. “Of course no compensation is required by the Sisters for their services,” the contract concludes.

But at the top of the document is a special proviso that speaks with both asperity and directness against the contemporary cultural role of the fashionable lady bountiful. “In the first place,” reads the document, “that no *lady* volunteers be associated with the Sisters in their duties as such an association would be rather an encumbrance than a help.”<sup>43</sup>

Apparently no directive from this document was operating, however, when the Sisters discovered that some of the civilian female volunteers had been turned away from the wounded at Gettysburg.

“The officers of the Federal Army treated the Sisters with the greatest confidence,” wrote Sister Matilda:

— would give them all the privileges possible—which they positively refused to ladies who came on offering their services to nurse the wounded; they refused them saying the Sisters of Charity were caring [for] them. We found out that the Union officers were under the impression that the ladies from Baltimore and elsewhere were all *Rebels* so they would not accept of their services.<sup>44</sup>

After the battle of Gettysburg, however, other women from town and country did in fact assist with nursing duties—whether at the same sites as the Sisters of Charity is unclear. One farm woman, the wife of a country doctor from

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<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 503.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 544.

nearby Bendersville, and her teen-age daughter both helped with nursing services. These were the sister and niece of our Towsontown diarist. Although the records left by the Sisters at St. Joseph's do not refer to collaboration with any other women, possibly such association may be inferred in further anecdotes by Sister Matilda concerning some ecumenical contacts with Protestants in the area.

Relating the experiences of the Sisters as they applied for clothing and other supplies at the various commissaries, Sister Matilda recounted how they were usually queried by those in charge: "Sisters, I suppose you want them for the Catholic Church Hospital."

"No," the Sisters would reply—as the case might be—"we want them for the Methodist Church Hospital" or "we want some articles of clothing for the prisoners in the Lutheran Seminary Hospital." However surprised the clerk might be, the reaction, Sister Matilda reported, was always positive:

Yes, Sister you shall have what you want for the prisoners as well as for our own. You ladies (the Sisters) come with honest faces and you shall always get whatever you need for the suffering men whether Rebels or our own....I sincerely hope we shall all *worship* at the same altar one day.<sup>45</sup>

This was the decade after the anti-Catholic outbreaks of the notorious Know-Nothing political movement, which had ravaged the big cities of the east coast throughout the 1850s. Politics in Baltimore had been particularly damaged by the violence of the Know-Nothing partisans, whose virulence was directed particularly against immigrants

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<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 544-545.

from Catholic Ireland and Germany. To many Protestants, the strange costumes, symbols, and practices of the Catholics were seen as wicked superstitions of ignorant foreigners.

In this context, therefore, another anecdote of Sister Matilda must have been particularly gratifying to the good Sisters. She was describing an encounter with an elderly gentleman who had come to Gettysburg in search of his son, uncertain whether the younger man had been lost in the battle or had survived. As the old gentleman sat in the sun on a bench outside McClellan's Hotel, he observed several of the Sisters leaving their quarters, loaded with bundles of clothing to take to the wounded. As he watched their mission of kindness, the old man exclaimed to the hotel proprietor: "Good God, can those Sisters be the persons whose religion we always *run down*!"

"Yes," said McClellan, "they are often run down by those who know nothing of their charity."

Later McClellan told the Sisters how he often heard remarks like this from others who watched the Sisters on their errands of mercy. Disabused of their former beliefs by the testimony of their own eyes, these non-Catholic witnesses would "almost *swear*," said McClellan, "that they would never again believe anything wrong of persons doing what those Sisters have been doing around the battleground of Gettysburg."<sup>46</sup>



During these hectic weeks McClellan had had to turn away from his doors many visitors like the old gentleman,

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<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 545-546.

and many whose call to this southern Pennsylvania town was more frivolous. Five days after the battle was over, two gentleman farmers—one a lawyer from Baltimore—came north as tourists, curious to witness with their own eyes what they had been reading about in all the daily papers. The lawyer was William P. Preston, husband of the Towson-town diarist, father of the St. Joseph's student who had received those letters from her Southern friends. As the two men drove along the turnpike from York toward Gettysburg, they were enjoying the golden light of the setting sun that made the other gold of the wheatfields seem to glow.

But when their carriage reached Oxford, ten miles east of the battle site, the two men found suddenly they now had to share the road with dozens of other vehicles of every sort—some joining them in their westward journey of curiosity, some moving toward them from Gettysburg. "The gestures and features," he was later to write,

of all who were on their way to the scene of conflict, betrayed an active and eager curiosity. Those who were returning wore a very different aspect, never have I seen such an unmistakable manifestation of wrath and horror—every man's features were painfully rigid and many looked as if all their preconceived opinions of humanity had been suddenly unsettled.

Something of the same transformation must have passed over Preston's own face. For his draft account—left among family papers—begins this way:

I have just returned from the battle field, the horrible scenes I have witnessed, pen or tongue can give but a

faint idea of. The impressions they have made can never be effaced.<sup>47</sup>

Evidently Preston turned those experiences later, however, into a gripping story with which he dazzled his neighbors and family. For his wife was to record in her diary that his report was "very interesting....I have never," she wrote, "had so correct an idea of a battle field, as since hearing Mr. Preston's account of it."<sup>48</sup>

Somewhere in all the confusion of the place—perhaps at the crowded and over-burdened hotel, where Preston could not get lodgings, he met at least two of the Sisters from his daughter's school. One of these, Sister Genevieve, usually ran the school's infirmary. Afterward Preston was always to refer to her as his own particular Sister, whom he had met first, tending the soldiers after the battle of Gettysburg.<sup>49</sup> He met here also, on a similar service of mercy, his sister-in-law, Louisa Smith.<sup>50</sup>

A little more than two months later Madge Preston accompanied the couple's young daughter back to school. By now the regular Academy staff were back at their accustomed responsibilities. Before leaving Gettysburg, however, in a hired hack for the ten-mile trip south to St. Joseph's, Mrs. Preston stopped at "the Hospital." What she saw there was painful, she wrote, yet also gratifying. She did not say why. Then she swung by to visit at the tents in

<sup>47</sup>"A Letter from Battle field of Gettysburg," July 7, 1863. William P. Preston Collection, MS. 620, Historical Manuscripts and Archives, McKeldin Library, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742. Used with permission.

<sup>48</sup>Madge Preston, 1863 Diary, Sunday, July 12. Maryland Historical Society.

<sup>49</sup>Letter from Madge to May Preston, October 13, 1865, University of Maryland.

<sup>50</sup>Madge Preston Diary, July 12, 1863.

charge of a military officer who was an acquaintance. Here she met other officers, and she also saw "one poor man who had just died prepared for the grave."<sup>51</sup> On September 22 Mrs. Preston toured the battlefield itself, where she received a lesson on the military movements of the two armies. Sometime along the way she stopped to gather "relics of warlike character and also flowers." Then two days later she went back again to visit the military camp, where she remarked on her feelings of disgust at "some of the Exhibitions" designed "to amuse the poor sick soldiers with." Nevertheless, she took solace in comforting certain of the Confederate wounded, with whom she sat conversing until evening."<sup>52</sup>

Preston himself met at least one other besides Sister Genevieve among those who tended the wounded after the battle of Gettysburg. This was Sister Matilda, the narrator of all these moving experiences concerning the Sisters' nursing tasks. Preston would later say of her: "Of all the ladies I have ever met, Sister Matilda stands preeminent in conversational power."<sup>53</sup> Perhaps that is why Sister Matilda was called upon by her Mother Superior, after the dreadful work was over, to leave the written record of their days at Gettysburg.<sup>54</sup>

But this is not the end of our story. For two and a half years later, the strange encounter between the curious tourist and the dedicated Sister Matilda was to bear strange

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<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, July 20, 1863.

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, July 22 and July 24.

<sup>53</sup>Quoted in a letter by his wife to their daughter, May, October 1, 1865. University of Maryland.

<sup>54</sup>Secretary's note at end of the account, *Annals*, p. 546.

fruit. Early in 1866 the Sisters of Charity, in the person of Mother Euphemia (under her natal name as Mary Blenkinsop) and the staff physician, Dr. William Stokes, went on trial as defendants in a lawsuit concerning their operation of Mount Hope Institution, a Baltimore insane asylum. The charge of conspiracy to defraud the families of insane patients was flimsy at best. It was, in fact, politically motivated by Know-Nothing adherents who were hoping to stir up anti-Catholic fires that had seemingly died away during the years of war. Outraged by these charges, the Protestant Preston volunteered to serve on the defense team in support of the Sisters. Thus early in December of 1865, Preston met from time to time with Sister Matilda and other Sisters.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps they were giving testimony and helping to prepare a strategy for the defense. The trial itself began on February 6, 1866, with the prosecution, led by Alexander H. Rogers, the State's Attorney, holding forth in the lengthy, florid style of the time, for the better part of two days. Finally, on February 8, Preston stepped forth in a speech of rebuttal. Noted around Baltimore as a spell-binding orator, Preston let roll the full sweep of his emotional delivery on behalf of that "numerous band of noble ladies, whose unobtrusive piety and self-sacrificing actions are themes of admiration and praise throughout the world....Are we blind?" he thundered, lifting his hand skyward. Or so he is depicted in an old photograph that commemorates the trial.<sup>56</sup> "Have we lost all sense? Are we dead to every emotion of human feeling?"

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<sup>55</sup>Madge Preston, Diary, December 10 and December 14, 1865; letter by May Preston to William P. Preston, December 10, 1865, University of Maryland.

<sup>56</sup>In the possession of the Daughters of Charity, St. Joseph's Provincial House, Emmitsburg.



Rising to his full height, he called out in his booming voice, to the admiration of all who heard him,

Strike down the Sisters of Charity! Cover with infamy and disgrace an order of women, who, in the midst of every privation, in the midst of every suffering, without limit to endurance, have invariably been found wherever human woe was deemed most bitter.

Then speaking quietly—and no doubt looking in the direction of Sister Matilda, who would have been sitting there motionless, though who could tell how her heart was beating beneath the folds of her encompassing garment—Preston drew on his own moving experience of the summer of 1863:

Within the sound of my voice, and within this court-room, is one whom upon the bloody field of Gettysburgh I saw bending over the dying and the dead—binding up with her own hands the prostrate soldier's wounds, or commending, with her earnest prayers, his departing spirit to the mercy of his God.<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps the seemingly frivolous journey of this sightseer to the battlefield of Gettysburg had been a necessary part of God's design, another miracle wrought for this quiet sister-

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<sup>57</sup>*Report of the Trial of Dr. Wm. H. Stokes and Mary Blenkinsop, Physician and Sister Superior of Mount Hope Institution Before the Circuit Court for Baltimore Co., Md. Held at Towsontown, Tuesday, February 6, 1866. By Eugene L. Didier, Stenographic Reporter. Together with an Introductory Account of the Circumstances which gave rise to the Case, the Preliminary Legal Proceedings, and the Origin of the Sisters of Charity.* (Baltimore: Kelly & Piet, Printers and Publishers, 1866), pp. 84ff. A copy of this volume, which was privately printed by Preston, is in the collection of the Maryland Historical Society.

hood. After more than a week of trial testimony that gripped the attention of Baltimore citizens, the case collapsed on February 14 when the State's Attorney, Rogers, filed a plea of *nol pros*. The defense team, of course, averred that a verdict of acquittal would have been more appropriate. But in any case, Preston, the hero of the hour, was hailed as the Sisters' "champion."

How kindly the good Sisters regarded him is recorded in a passage from a letter by his daughter, May, quoting Sister Genevieve, "that he must have changed greatly since she met him on the battle-field at Gettysburg, for he did not seem to be such a terrible person then as his friend Rogers appears to think him now."<sup>58</sup>

The battle of Gettysburg touched many lives in many ways. After more than a century, its awesome impact still reverberates.



*How happy should you be that God has chosen you to nurse the poor wounded. From the moment you leave here your good angels will count your footsteps; all that you say, do or think will be reckoned for you in God's sight.*

St. Vincent de Paul

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<sup>58</sup>Letter from May Preston, February 24, 1866, to Madge Preston, University of Maryland.

*I see so much disorder everywhere that it seems to me I am overwhelmed by it; nevertheless I continue to hope and will trust Divine Providence.*

St. Louise de Marillac



*Weep with your poor and your sick. God had appointed you to be their consolation.*

St. Vincent de Paul



*How happy you are, my dear Sisters, to have such a large number of sick to serve! Oh, how plain it is that God loves you since He affords you so many occasions of serving Him.! Continue to do so for His love with all requisite meekness, care, and charity!*

St. Louise de Marillac